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AUTHOR Barenbaum, Nicole B.; Bursik, Krisanne
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ABSTRACT

A total of 128 recently separated mothers and their children were interviewed and completed a number of adjustment measures as well as a measure of interparent acrimony. Legal information regarding the separation and divorce, which also serves as a measure of acrimony, was collected from public court records. Several variables assessing interparent acrimony, including legal variables, were found to be significantly related to children's adjustment problems. Both the length of time since the physical separation and the amount of father contact during the post-separation period moderated the relationship between interparent acrimony and children's adjustment. Findings clearly pointed to interparent acrimony as an important predictor of children's adjustment to parental separation. (Relationships among these variables are discussed in terms of the family system during this transition.) (Author/RH)

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# Parental Acrimony and Children's Post-Separation Adjustment

Nicole B. Barenbaum & Krisanne Bursik
Boston University

## Abstract

One hundred twenty-eight recently separated mothers and their children were interviewed and completed a number of adjustment measures as well as a measure of interparent acrimony. Legal information regarding the separation and divorce, also a measure of acrimony, was collected from public court records. Several variables assessing interparent acrimony, including legal variables, were significantly related to children's adjustment problems. Both the length of time since the physical separation and the amount of father contact during the post-separation period moderated the relationship between interparent acrimony and children's adjustment. The relationship among these variables is discussed in terms of the family system during this transition.

## Introduction

Parental relationship factors appear to be important predictors of children's adjustment to separation and divorce. In particular, the level of interparent acrimony has been identified as one of several factors having a negative effect on children's adjustment to this stressful life change. Several studies support the view that children adjust better to parental divorce when the spouses have a low level of conflict and hostility before and after the divorce (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Jacobson, 1978; Lowenstein & Koopman, 1978; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; Rosen, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Although one might assume that separation/divorce constitutes an event after which parental interaction and therefore acrimony abates, this is not necessarily the case. Acrimony following the separation may continue to be as intense as that which existed during the pre-separation interparent relationship, or may even escalate (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The present study considers whether there is a relationship between the child's post-separation adjustment and level of interparent acrimony at several times during the divorce process, including the year before the physical separation and during the early post-separation period. We are also considering a number of variables which may be used to measure both levels and types of acrimony. These include the more typically used parent or child report of interparent hostility, as well as a number of more objective legal indicators representing different types of divorce conflict. More specifically, we hypothesized that:

(1) Legal indicators of acrimony, such as the grounds for the divorce and the filing of restraining or vacating motions, should be related to acrimony in the interparent relationship as assessed by

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self-report measures. Further, the particular types of motions filed, rather than the total number of motions filed by either spouse, may reflect the actual nature of the conflict being experienced by the couple.

We also expected that:

(2) Higher levels of parental acrimony would be related to adjustment problems in children. This relationship should hold for interparent acrimony reported for the pre-separation as well as the post-separation periods.

Weiss (1975) has documented the difficulty that many couples experience in disengaging from one another, particularly in the early post-separation period. Such couples may remain in frequent contact, despite high levels of acrimony. This pattern of frequent contact between hostile parents has been found to have negative effects on children's adjustment (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Over time, parents generally do become disengaged, and the mother and children are able to establish a new family system (Weiss, 1975). We expected that, to the extent that this was possible, children should be less affected by interparent acrimony. Thus, we hypothesized that:

(3) The relationship between interparent acrimony and children's adjustment should be moderated by the length of separation and by the amount of father contact during the post-separation period, with children whose parents' separation has lasted longer, and children whose fathers are not in close contact, less affected by interparent acrimony.

## Subjects

Subjects were 128 Caucasian mother-child pairs participating in a larger longitudinal study of the effects of parental separation and divorce on families. All families were recruited through a search of public divorce dockets of five counties in the greater Boston area. Families with at least one child aged 6-12, who had been physically separated less than eight months at the time of filing, were selected as "target families" and contacted for participation in the study. Although as many family members as possible were interviewed within eight months following the physical separation and again one year after the initial interview, only the data for custodial mothers and one "target" child from each family are reported in this paper. The target children, aged 6-12, include 66 males and 62 females.

Mothers and children were interviewed separately no later than eight months after the parents had filed for divorce. Mothers were also mailed a set of questionnaires which they completed at home and brought with them to the interview.

## Variables Assessing Parental Acrimony

To assess the level of acrimony in the pre-separation marital relationship we used an adaptation of the Conflict Tactics Scales developed by Straus (1979). Mothers reported, using a 5-point scale ranging from "never" to "more than once a month," the frequency with which they and their husbands used various strategies for handling conflict with each other. Three scales were created from this measure: the reasoning scale, including such items as "tried to discuss the issue relatively calmly," the verbal aggression scale, including items involving verbal hostility and threats (e.g. "threatened to hit or throw something") and the violence scale, (e.g. "pushed, grabbed, or shoved the other person").

Court records were the source of four legal variables used to assess acrimony in the couple between the time of filing for divorce and the time of the interview:

Cruel and abusive filing status was coded if the grounds for the divorce were cruel and abusive treatment. All other grounds were grouped together because they seemed less clearly to involve open conflict (e.g. irretrievable breakdown, alcoholism, etc.).

Restraining motions is the number of motions made by either spouse for a restraining order to protect him/herself from the other. This variable was included as an indicator of ongoing conflict in the couple. Spouses who filed such motions, it was reasoned, were either experiencing or had reason to fear violence or harassment from each other.

Vacating motions is the number of motions made by either spouse to order the other to leave the marital home. The use of such motions seems to indicate that the separation itself is difficult, with spouses unable to agree even on who will leave the home.

Total number of motions represents the sum of all types of motions (technical/legal motions, motions for support, etc.) made by either spouse from the time of filing to the time of the interview, including motions in the original divorce complaint.

Mothers' and childrens' reports were the source of two variables assessing the degree of interparent acrimony at the time of the interview:

Spouse acrimony represents the mothers' view of their relationships with their husbands. Their descriptions of these relationships were coded using a 5-point scale ranging from "friendly" to "hostile."

Parent acrimony represents the childrens' view of their parents' relationship, coded on a 4-point scale ranging from "totally positive" to "totally negative."

## Variables Assessing Children's Adjustment

Child self-report:

Stress symptoms were measured using an adapted version of the adult self-report Symptom Checklist (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). Items were read to the children who reported on 3-point scales ("a lot," "a little," "not at all") the frequency with which they felt the symptoms.

Negative affect was measured during interviews with the children. Children were asked to describe their emotional reaction to their parents' separation and were also asked how often they felt specific emotions about the separation. Scales for anger, sadness, guilt, and confusion were created by combining the open- and close-ended responses for each emotion.

Mother report:

Physical illness was reported by the mothers using a questionnaire concerning their children's health. Items for the questionnaire were drawn from the many illness questionnaires available (e.g. Wahler, 1973; Abramson, Terespolsky, Brook, & Kark, 1965).

Several scales representing different types of behavior problems were created using the Child Behavior Checklist Parent Form

(Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). These scales represented somatic problems, hyperactive, aggressive, and delinquent behavior problems, and total problems which included the foregoing sub-scales as well as additional items.

Teacher report:

For 77 of the target children we had available Child Behavior Checklists, Teacher Forms (Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1982), completed by the children's regular schoolteacher. Total problems as rated by the teachers were assessed using this scale.

Results

(1) The intercorrelations among the different measures of acrimony were generally high (see Table 1). As expected, legal indicators of acrimony were related to self-report measures. Not surprisingly, the reasoning scale of the Conflict Tactics measure appears to be unrelated to acrimony, while the verbal aggression and violence scales seem to represent escalating levels of acrimony.

(2) Acrimony variables were related to a number of adjustment problems in children (see Table 2). Among conflict tactics, the violence scale was significantly related to anger and illness, and to hyperactive and delinquent behavior problems, while the verbal aggression scale was related only to hyperactive behavior, and the reasoning scale was unrelated to any problems. Thus, more intense forms of acrimony were associated with more adjustment problems.

Spouse acrimony and parent acrimony, the mothers' and children's reports of the interparent relationship, were significantly related only to delinquent behavior as reported by the mothers. Among our indicators of acrimony, these reports were the weakest predictors of children's adjustment.

Among the legal variables, restraining motions and vacating motions were particularly strong predictors of children's behavior problems. Although related to some adjustment problems, the cruel and abusive filing status was not as strong a predictor. Roughly half of the sample (48%) were in this filing category, suggesting that these grounds may be used for legal convenience or expediency and do not necessarily represent higher levels of acrimony in all cases. Restraining and vacating motions were less commonly used and may thus provide better indicators of high acrimony, or of a particular type of acrimony in which the couple have difficulty separating.

(3) These results seemed to support the hypothesis that interparent acrimony has a stronger effect on children as long as parents remain overinvolved. To further test this hypothesis we used length of separation as a moderator of the relationship between acrimony and children's adjustment, reasoning that parents should become more disengaged over time. As Tables 3 and 4 show, children's adjustment in families separated less than 4 months was much more strongly related to interparent acrimony than was children's adjustment in families separated between 4 and 8 months. Overall levels of interparent acrimony and children's adjustment were comparable for the two groups of families; thus, only the relationship among acrimony and adjustment differed. Of course, longitudinal analyses are needed to confirm what appears to be the moderating effect of length of separation.

We performed similar analyses using the amount of father contact as a moderator instead of length of separation. Although the amount of father contact was assessed from the child interviews and as such may not have been reliable, we did find stronger relationships between interparent acrimony and children's adjustment when father contact was high than when it was low. Amount of father contact was not related to any acrimony or adjustment variables or to length of separation. Thus, the negative effects of interparent acrimony were heightened by frequent father contact, perhaps because children were exposed to the conflict more regularly.

## Conclusions

The findings clearly point to interparent acrimony as an important predictor of children's adjustment to parental separation. Significant associations were found between varying types of verbal, physical, and legal acrimony and children's adjustment as assessed by multiple indicators from several reporters. These relationships were especially strong for indicators of acrimony which we interpreted as representing a particular type of conflict in which parents are hostile but unable to disengage from one another. The use of restraining and vacating motions seemed to indicate this type of hostile overinvolvement and inability to separate, and these variables were the strongest predictors of adjustment problems. The effects of interparent acrimony on children were much less substantial in families who had been separated longer or whose fathers were in less close contact. Presumably in both of these situations the parents are more fully disengaged and the custodial mother and children are becoming established as the new family system, one which is less responsive to the parents' relationship.

While much literature has been devoted to the effects of interparent conflict on children, not enough attention has been paid to the effects of different types of conflict. Further research is needed in order to understand these different types of conflict and to help families in different situations adjust to separation and divorce.

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Table 1: Intercorrelations of Acrimony Variables

| | Reasoning scale | Verbal Aggression scale | Violence scale | Cruel & Abusive status | Restraining motions | Vacating motions | Total motions | Spouse acrimony | Parent acrimony |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reasoning Scale | 1.00 | -.07 | -.21* | -.06 | -.08 | .03 | -.05 | -.10 | -.06 |
| Verbal aggression scale | | 1.00 | .55*** | .11 | -.04 | .08 | .00 | .24* | .14 |
| Violence scale | | | 1.00 | .29** | .20* | .16 | .15 | .31** | -.01 |
| Cruel & Abusive status | | | | 1.00 | .22* | .22* | .34*** | .10 | .13 |
| Restraining motions | | | | | 1.00 | .52*** | .70*** | .34*** | .16 |
| Vacating motions | | | | | | 1.00 | .70*** | .27** | .29** |
| Total motions | | | | | | | 1.00 | .38*** | .32** |
| Spouse acrimony | | | | | | | | 1.00 | .36*** |
| Parent acrimony | | | | | | | | | 1.00 |

*p<.05 (N=128)
**p<.01
***p<.001

Table 2: Correlations of Acrimony and Adjustment Variables

| | Reasoning scale | Verbal Aggression scale | Violence scale | Cruel & Abusive status | Restraining motions | Vacating motions | Total motions | Spouse acrimony | Parent acrimony |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Child self-report | | | | | | | | | |
| Stress symptoms | -.02 | .01 | .08 | -.04 | .13 | .04 | .09 | .03 | .10 |
| Reactions to divorce | | | | | | | | | |
| Anger | -.04 | .20 | .23* | .12 | .06 | -.04 | .13 | .04 | .09 |
| Sadness | -.14 | .02 | .00 | .00 | .10 | .02 | .12 | .06 | .05 |
| Guilt | .09 | .00 | .04 | -.02 | .08 | -.06 | .07 | .02 | .03 |
| Confusion | -.10 | .08 | .19 | -.05 | .11 | -.09 | -.04 | -.03 | -.02 |
| Mother report | | | | | | | | | |
| Physical illness | -.17 | .13 | .22* | .24* | .20* | .12 | .19* | .13 | .13 |
| Child Behavior Checklist | | | | | | | | | |
| Somatic problems | -.08 | .00 | .05 | .23* | .10 | -.06 | .06 | -.04 | -.03 |
| Hyperactive behavior | -.02 | .25* | .28** | .18 | .25** | .17 | .16 | .09 | .06 |
| Aggressive behavior | -.10 | .15 | .14 | .15 | .25** | .19* | .20* | .12 | .17 |
| Delinquent behavior | -.06 | .19 | .22* | .28** | .28** | .31*** | .30** | .20* | .24* |
| Total problems | .00 | .19 | .17 | .19 | .27** | .19* | .18 | .07 | .13 |
| Teacher report | | | | | | | | | |
| Total problems | .18 | .06 | .09 | .11 | .18 | .30** | .20 | .22 | .01 |

(Overall N=128, but slight fluctuations due to missing data cause significance levels to vary.)

Table 3: Correlations of Acrimony and Adjustment Variables - Short Separation Group (<4 Months)

| | Reasoning scale | Verbal Aggression scale | Violence scale | Cruel & Abusive status | Restraining motions | Vacating motions | Total motions | Spouse acrimony | Parent acrimony |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Child self-report | | | | | | | | | |
| Stress symptoms | -.21 | .03 | .33* | .07 | .37** | .12 | .20 | .14 | .29 |
| Reactions to divorce | | | | | | | | | |
| Anger | .17 | .14 | .24 | .30* | .13 | -.05 | .12 | .04 | .17 |
| Sadness | -.29 | -.26 | .05 | .06 | .02 | -.05 | .01 | .11 | -.05 |
| Guilt | .08 | .22 | .23 | .03 | .14 | -.01 | .10 | .15 | .07 |
| Confusion | -.12 | -.09 | .11 | -.06 | .18 | -.17 | -.09 | -.17 | -.07 |
| Mother report | | | | | | | | | |
| Physical illness | -.14 | .22 | .29 | .32* | .36* | .20 | .25 | .22 | .26 |
| Child Behavior Checklist | | | | | | | | | |
| Somatic problems | -.26 | .00 | .04 | .11 | .28 | -.06 | .05 | .08 | .22 |
| Hyperactive behavior | -.03 | .33* | .28 | .27 | .22 | .19 | .16 | .07 | .15 |
| Aggressive behavior | -.10 | .34* | .39* | .22 | .38** | .37** | .30* | .25 | .35* |
| Delinquent behavior | -.02 | .37* | .50** | .32* | .33* | .47*** | .40** | .30* | .38* |
| Total problems | -.10 | .38* | .43** | .26 | .36* | .33* | .28 | .21 | .32* |
| Teacher report | | | | | | | | | |
| Total problems | .21 | .15 | .10 | .09 | .30 | .35* | .30 | .16 | .10 |

N=56

Table 4: Correlations of Acrimony and Adjustment Variables - Long Separation Group (4-8 Months)

| | Reasoning scale | Verbal Aggression scale | Violence scale | Cruel & Abusive status | Restraining motions | Vacating motions | Total motions | Spouse acrimony | Parent acrimony |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Child self-report | | | | | | | | | |
| Stress symptoms | .13 | -.01 | -.06 | -.12 | -.07 | -.08 | -.02 | -.05 | -.01 |
| Reactions to divorce | | | | | | | | | |
| Anger | -.20 | .24 | .23 | -.02 | .01 | -.01 | .15 | .04 | .04 |
| Sadness | .01 | .24 | -.04 | -.05 | .15 | .09 | .20 | .01 | .14 |
| Guilt | .09 | -.19 | -.07 | -.07 | .01 | -.21 | .03 | -.11 | .02 |
| Confusion | -.09 | .22 | .25 | -.05 | .05 | -.03 | -.02 | .08 | .04 |
| Mother report | | | | | | | | | |
| Physical illness | -.22 | .09 | .19 | .16 | -.05 | -.18 | .01 | .04 | .04 |
| Child Behavior Checklist | | | | | | | | | |
| Somatic problems | .06 | .01 | .07 | .32* | -.06 | -.10 | .05 | -.14 | -.17 |
| Hyperactive behavior | -.03 | .21 | .31* | .12 | .26* | .11 | .13 | .11 | .01 |
| Aggressive behavior | -.12 | .02 | .00 | .09 | .08 | -.21 | .00 | -.01 | .06 |
| Delinquent behavior | -.13 | .06 | .04 | .25 | .21 | -.06 | .12 | .09 | .15 |
| Total problems | .08 | .08 | .04 | .13 | .16 | -.07 | .04 | -.06 | .00 |
| Teacher report | | | | | | | | | |
| Total problems | .15 | .08 | .21 | .12 | .05 | .15 | .00 | .26 | -.06 |

N=72